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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 TEGUCIGALPA 001114

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

SAN SALVADOR FOR LEGATT
HQ BICE WASHINGTON DC FOR NATIONAL GANG TASK FORCE

STATE FOR WHA/CEN

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [SNAR](#) [SMIG](#) [PINS](#) [PINR](#) [SOCI](#) [PGOV](#) [CVIS](#) [HO](#) [KCRM](#) [KJUS](#)
SUBJECT: TFHO1 Gangs Wage War While Police Distracted By Street
Protests

REF: 2008 Human Rights Report

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Since a June 18 prison escape by leaders of a Honduras transnational gang, a street war has killed at least 42 people, including four police and nine civilian women and children, most in broad daylight. The 18th Street and Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) gangs are exploiting the current political and security turmoil to fight for control of drug sales, weapons and human trafficking, and other criminal operations. Two of the escapees were originally apprehended by Honduras Police (HNP) and FBI for kidnapping two AMCIIT minors. Honduran prison records, fingerprints and photographs of inmates are grossly inadequate and the identities of some of the escapees are still unconfirmed. HNP and DHS/ICE indicate gang leaders move between Honduras, the United States and possibly Colombia. Post is increasing programs to identify and apprehend transnational gang leaders. End summary.

¶2. (U) Police informants report that the escape from the San Pedro Sula prison by 18 members of the 18th Street Gang on June 18 at 18:00 local was an attempt to retake control of criminal operations usurped by the larger MS-13, especially in the western and northern corridor near Guatemala and the Caribbean. In 2005, the two gangs extended to Honduras the "Sur-13" agreement reached in United States prisons, under which members of both gangs inside prison walls laid aside differences to work together under the Mexican Mafia. Boundaries between gang turfs in Honduran cities were to be respected and incursions against rival criminal operations discouraged. 18th Street has been the more violent of the two gangs, but in recent years the HNP has been successful in arresting most of its leaders. In their absence, in 2008 MS-13 began violating the truce and taking over lucrative 18th Street operations, especially local drug distribution and sales. Major gang crime in Honduras includes contract executions for Mexican drug cartels, as well as their own extortions, kidnappings, weapons and human trafficking, illegal immigration, asset laundering and shell companies. Income from these operations is hard to estimate but is likely in the hundreds of millions of dollars.

¶3. (U) There have been at least four prison escapes or attempts since June, but only three gang escapees have been recaptured. Six others were killed by the HNP and six by criminal rivals. More than thirty revenge killings of gang members and ex-members have also occurred since the June mass escape. The HNP Gang Unit now calls the spiral of violent reprisals an all-out gang war. Attacks have included home invasions, massacres of entire families and shoot-outs in gas stations, in front of malls and markets, and on busy streets at rush hour, killing gang members from both sides.

¶4. (U) Police have captured or killed only a few suspects of these massacres. On July 17, two MS-13 leaders with police uniforms were caught kidnapping a local merchant. On August 19, four 18th Street members were intercepted by police during another kidnapping. Armed with AK-47s, grenades and body armor, all four died in the ensuing firefight. Two were escapees from the June San Pedro Sula prison break. HNP has not identified the other two bodies but one carried _apparently Guatemalan identification documents.

¶5. (SBU) Four police officers have also fallen in this gang war. Most ominous was the September 6 assassination of gang agent Enoc Castro, age 27, shot 30 times near his home by three suspected MS-13 members. Agent Castro was a close collaborator of the US Embassy in Honduras, and was probably targeted for his successful arrest record. He was the first undercover agent buried by the HNP with full officer's honors. A national manhunt is underway for his killers and the HNP is concerned more gang agents may be targeted.

¶6. (SBU) There are also suspicions that several recent homicides of suspected and confirmed gang members may actually be extrajudicial executions. Since September 25, at least seven young men have been

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executed near San Pedro Sula. Some had their hands bound behind their back, indicating the killings were not random drive by shootings, and all had their shirts pulled up, which may indicate the victims were not known personally to their killers, who may have been looking for gang tattoos. A handwritten note with two of the bodies stated: "Cleaning up the city." In the recent past, Honduras has experienced episodes of extrajudicial executions by vigilante groups with the apparent collusion of security forces (Ref).

¶7. (SBU) DHS/ICE and FBI have attempted to indentify all recent escapees, but Honduran prisons have photographs and fingerprints for barely half of gang inmates. ICE and FBI Fingerprint ID Numbers and Immigration Lookouts have been issued for all escapees, but there is reliable information that the identities of several escapees are incorrect; some listed as killed may actually be at large. ICE and FBI have documented many gang members and leaders operating between Honduras, neighboring Central American countries and the United States. Flight of violent gang escapees to the United States is a serious concern.

¶8. (SBU) COMMENT: The political crisis and suspension of both normal HNP operations and U.S-Honduran security cooperation are taking their toll. Transnational gangs in Honduras are at war and are becoming increasingly violent over control of lucrative criminal enterprises, showing no concern for civilian casualties. Gangs, organized crime and drug traffickers have exploited the post-coup diversion of police and legal manpower to sharply increase their illegal activities. The HNP Anti-Gang Unit requires more support from other HNP branches and judiciary and from United States law enforcement to identify, locate and apprehend gang leaders. ICE and INL are creating closer working relationships to train HNP gang investigators and pursue cases against gang leaders, including generating complete photographs and fingerprints of all gang members in Honduran prisons.

¶9. (SBU) Comment continued: Once the constitutional order is restored in Honduras and U.S. security activities can resume, ICE, FBI and INL plan to implement measures to counter the gang activity. ICE and INL will support intelligence collection and cell phone blocking at Honduran prisons. ICE and INL are currently vetting HNP agents for apprehending gang members moving illegally back and forth to the United States. FBI and INL plan next year to create a Transnational Anti-Gang Unit and an automated fingerprint

identification system in Honduras. INL has significant funding to support vetted gang and anti-kidnapping units and improve prosecutions of violent gang criminals. The gang war in Honduras is not over, and there is an increasing risk of flight by violent gang criminals to the United States. Two upcoming cables will examine the growing sophistication of Honduran gangs and the increase in attempts to illegally enter and operate in the United States. End comment.

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